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GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA



EXECUTIVE OFFICE OF THE MAYOR

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Committee on Government Reform  
United States House of Representatives

Congressman Thomas M. Davis, III, Chairman  
Congressman Henry A. Waxman, Ranking Member

***“Alternative Schools and Educational Reform  
in the District of Columbia”***

Statement of  
**Anthony A. Williams**  
Mayor  
District of Columbia

Friday, May 9, 2003  
2154 Rayburn House Office Building  
11:00 a.m.

Good morning Chairman Davis, Ranking Member Waxman, Congresswoman Norton, Committee members, and other distinguished guests. I am Anthony A. Williams, Mayor of the District of Columbia. Chairman Davis, I greatly appreciate the leadership, support and encouragement you have provided our great city and look forward to your chairmanship as a time when we will accomplish even more great things – starting, I hope, with budget autonomy this year. I am pleased to come before you and this committee today to discuss alternative schools and educational reform in the District of Columbia.

As you know, education is a major priority for my administration. My vision for the children of the District of Columbia is that every child, regardless of the school they attend, will have access to a high quality education in a healthy and safe environment. I envision a city in which every young person will: 1) come to school ready to learn, and leave with the necessary skills to be successful in today's technologically advanced society; 2) be taught to be responsible citizens and to make valuable contributions to their local and global communities; and 3) have access to adequate social services to support their learning. While we have made major progress, we still have a long way to go before realizing this vision.

Let me first acknowledge that many good things are happening in the District's schools. The District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS), under the leadership of Superintendent Paul Vance and the Board of Education, has launched an initiative to transform our lowest performing schools, infusing them with new leadership, staff and additional resources. We now have identified 15 of these Transformation schools and early indications show us they are making a difference. My administration strongly supports DCPS in this initiative. In addition, last year DCPS underwent a massive central office transformation to streamline services and ensure that more resources flow directly to the classroom. Together with the District Council, we have provided record pay increases to our teachers, bringing entry level pay closer to parity with our suburban neighbors.

My administration has been working with the schools on an interagency collaboration to provide wrap-around support for our neediest children. We are beginning to provide these services in five of the Transformation Schools. By providing a host of family support services

from District of Columbia agencies at these schools, we hope to allow teachers to relinquish their de facto roles as part-time health and welfare counselors to children and their families, and allow them to focus completely on their role as educators. Finally, just last week I forwarded DCPS's State Accountability Plan to the US Department of Education which demonstrates great progress in how the District will comply with the *No Child Left Behind* legislation.

As you know, the District also has a very strong public charter school movement; we believe it is the strongest in the nation. We currently have 42 charter schools, which provide approximately 11,500 students with a range of educational programs including math and science, technology, arts, English as and Second Language (ESL) and dual language immersion, character development, public policy, and college preparatory study. These schools offer many approaches to learning, including individualized instruction, small academies, and schools within schools. .

Recognizing that significant progress has been made since 1995 when Congress passed the District of Columbia School Reform Act, the District public school system still faces an abundance of challenges. Many students enter school with developmental challenges that have not been effectively identified and addressed. Moreover, the District must do more to improve student achievement scores in kindergarten through 12th grade. In school year (SY) 2000 - 2001, some 25 percent of District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) students scored below basic on the Stanford-9 Reading test and 36 percent scored below basic in math. The more significant challenges include a large special education population, increasing demands for adequate facilities for both traditional and charter schools, and the need to attract and retain highly qualified teachers. Thus, despite the steady increases in local funding<sup>1</sup>, and other efforts to support our public schools, I have heard firsthand from hundreds of parents who feel there are no practical and easy alternatives for their children within the current systems of public schools.

This gets to the crux of the matter. Our dynamic Transformation Schools Initiative, our liberal out-of-boundary enrollment programs, and our robust charter schools are providing real choices for some parents. But there are still countless students whose schools are not among

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<sup>1</sup> The Mayor and the Council have increased funding to public education by approximately 40% since 1997.

those on the fast track to transformation and for whom there are no practical charter school alternatives. Even if we are successful in increasing the tempo on these brilliant initiatives, there will be tens of thousands of students still waiting for more choices. I cannot tell parents that they must continue to wait while there are other outlets in our midst.

In short, we need to reexamine the way we do business. It is time that we explore other solutions to ensure that every child has access to a quality education in the District. I have confidence that our public school system is getting better, but that does not mean that I, as the elected Mayor of this city, should ignore other educational assets currently at our disposal. To that end, I welcome the federal government's interest in our public schools and the success of the District's children. It is high time that the federal government address the inherent unfairness and illogical nature of the District's fulfillment of county, city, and state functions with a tax base severely constrained by the federal presence. So that we can further uplift our public schools, the federal government ought to assume our state level costs for special education so that our local school district is not saddled with costs that in any other jurisdiction would be borne by its state capital. The Congress has been generous in support of our charter schools, most recently by providing \$17 million in the FY 2003 budget for facilities support. This support ought to be repeated and expanded.

I support the President's desire to create a pilot scholarship program in the District. I believe, if done effectively, such a program could provide even more choices to low-income families, who currently do not have the same freedom of choice enjoyed by more affluent families. Understandably the issue of public support for private and parochial school tuitions raises fierce emotions on both sides, but there is a large body of research that speaks to its merits.

Dozens of studies, including those conducted by voucher opponents, have confirmed that school vouchers increase parental satisfaction with their child's school. Milwaukee, Cleveland, Florida, Maine and Vermont all have some form of voucher program and, by and large, these programs have been successful in increasing options for families. In addition, eight rigorous studies of six cities by research teams including scholars from Harvard, Princeton, the University of Chicago, Indiana University, the Brookings Institution and the Manhattan Institute, have all

confirmed that school choice boosts the academic achievement of inner-city African-American students. A recent study prepared by a team led by William G. Howell and Patrick J. Wolf surveyed more than 1,000 African American students in the District who attend nonpublic schools through support from the Washington Scholarship Fund. These students gained almost 10 national percentile points (NPR) in math and reading achievement after the first year and an average of 6.3 NPR after two years of being in private school.<sup>2</sup> Finally, it has been proven that school choice increases educational attainment; inner-city minority students are more likely to obtain a college degree if they attend private or parochial school, when compared with their public high school counterparts.<sup>3</sup>

This data notwithstanding, I believe that any voucher program for the District must recognize the reality and needs of the city and must be crafted with full participation of the city's elected leadership. I cannot support any program that is crafted without the input of officials and educators in the District. H.R. 684, "*The District of Columbia Student Opportunity Scholarship Act of 2003*," lays out precise criteria and principles for a scholarship program in the District but was crafted and introduced without any consultation or input from the city's elected leaders. Moreover, the bill creates a separate corporation staffed mostly by federal appointees to administer the program, adding another layer of complexity to our already diffused education system.

In contrast, I am pleased that Secretary Paige and officials at the Department of Education have met with us and asked us to join them in designing a program that would expand the availability of quality educational options for the District's poorest families. I believe they are sincere in seeing that the duly elected leaders of our municipal government and others have a major role in designing a program that works for us and our children. An effective voucher program for the District would, at a minimum:

- focus on low-income parents and develop a means tested foundation;

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<sup>2</sup> Howell et al, "School Vouchers and Academic Performance..." op. cit.; see also William G. Howell and Paul E. Peterson, with Patrick J. Wolf and David E. Campbell, *The Education Gap: Vouchers and Urban Schools* (Washington: Brookings, 2002), pp. 150-52.

<sup>3</sup> Derek Neal, "The Effects of Catholic Secondary Schooling on Educational Achievement," *Journal of Labor Economics* 15:1, 1997.

- target students in the lowest performing schools, especially those that are not currently slated for transformation;
- emphasize opportunities for students who are not currently in nonpublic schools;
- seek to have students attend schools in the District and, where possible, in their neighborhoods;
- require schools to admit all eligible students and, in cases where grades or schools were oversubscribed, admit students based on lottery. The goal is not to “cream” the best and brightest students, but rather to give the neediest children opportunities they would otherwise not have;
- encompass a comprehensive accountability and evaluation component that would allow for solid longitudinal data collection and analysis so that years from now we can speak rather authoritatively about the impact on student achievement; and
- acknowledge the need for additional supports to help families assess information, and transition and adapt to private schools.

Such a program would allow us to make true comparisons over the next four years about the success and failures of each of our educational approaches. This endeavor may also provide an opportunity for us to strengthen our state-level oversight role with respect to the issue of private school accountability.

Finally, Mr. Chairman, since our city began to debate the issue of expanded school choice there has been speculation that the resolution will have impacts far beyond the District. Some say that what we do in the District will affect national education policy; the likelihood of pilots in other cities; the political standing of pro- and anti-voucher constituencies; and even the platforms of major political parties. For me, however, the issue of vouchers in the District has little to do with any of those factors.

I was elected by the people of my beloved city and took a solemn oath to act in what I think are their best interests, even in the face of conventional political wisdom. I have listened to children and parents and conclude that I have an obligation to do what I think is best for my city. I do not know whether vouchers are the right thing for other cities or states, or even if they will

have the same impact here 10 years from now. Today, however, I believe I have an obligation to represent all of the children of the District. I cannot say to thousands of our young people and their parents that they should not have more choices and opportunities to receive an education of which all of us can be proud. I humbly assert that this is called leadership and is in the finest traditions of democracy and Home Rule.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to testify before the committee on this very important issue. This concludes my statement. I would be glad to answer any questions you may have.